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Remembering Bellona: Gendered Allegories in the Australian War Memorial

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Abstract

It was just before Anzac Day this year. On the way into the Australian War Memorial to do some research I walked around its Sculpture Garden, looking at the statues and memorials.

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AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S HISTORY NETWORK

Remembering Bellona: Gendered allegories in the Australian War Memorial

Vera Mackie encourages some thoughtful reflection on the role of gender in the imagery of war.

It was just before Anzac Day this year. On the way into the Australian War Memorial to do some research I walked around its Sculpture Garden, looking at the statues and memorials.

To get to the Sculpture Garden I had to walk past a massive cannon. Military equipment like cannons, guns, tanks and aeroplanes are scattered all over the grounds. There are also numerous statues, sculptures and memorials.



'AUSTRALIAN
SERVICEMAN'.
PHOTOGRAPH BY
VERA MACKIE.

While not all of the memorials have statues of human figures, those which do are overwhelmingly male, most in military uniforms. Some are depictions of actual historical figures like army generals or military doctors; some stand in for groups of men. Ray Ewers' (1917–1998) statue of an '[Australian Serviceman](#)' from 1958 is larger than life, and the bare chest makes him seem more allegorical than literal, a heroic figure among the trees. This was originally commissioned for the Hall of Memory, but was moved in 1993 when the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was installed there. 'Australian Serviceman' was installed in the Sculpture Garden in 1995.

There is also a memorial to 'all women who served, suffered, and those who died in the defence of Australia'. The [Australian Servicewomen's Memorial](#) of 1999 is an abstract sculpture by Anne Ferguson with no human figures.

In the Sculpture Garden only two figures are of women, and these are allegorical figures: 'Patriotism' and 'War' (Bellona). These statues are by two of the sculptors most closely associated with the commemoration of war in Australia, Paul Montford (1868–1938) and Bertram Mackennal (1863–1931).



WAR MEMORIAL SCULPTURE
GARDEN. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA
MACKIE

'Patriotism' is a maquette for one of Montford's sculptures for the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, which was completed in 1934. The four corners of the Shrine are decorated with the allegorical figures of Patriotism, Sacrifice, Justice and Peace, and Goodwill. In Melbourne, 'Patriotism' appears on the North-West buttress of the Shrine.



'AUSTRALIAN SERVICEWOMEN'S MEMORIAL'. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

The small maquette was acquired by the Australian War Memorial in 1991, which describes it as follows:

The base of the group represents the prow of a ship, drawn on wheels by lions, the child between them representing generations unborn who will be heirs to the spirit of freedom. Enthroned above the chariot stands the symbolic figure of Patriotism in a scaled breastplate and holding an ancient Greek helmet.

Montford's statue follows the tradition of using female figures to represent abstract qualities such as patriotism, as surveyed by Marina Warner in her book *Monuments and Maidens*. Warner was intrigued by the plethora of representations of woman as allegory, and the dearth of statues of actual women in public places. While male statues were often of actual, heroic figures, women were more likely to be read as allegorical or mythological figures. As [Chilla Bulbeck](#) explains, 'women could be used to represent their own absence, and the virtues to which men aspired'.

The Australian War Memorial, it seems, has inherited this tradition.

On moving from the Sculpture Garden to the Australian War Memorial itself, one encounters some other allegorical female figures. One is a sculptural fragment discovered by Australians in the ruins of the French town of Bapaume, which they dubbed '[The Woman in the Dugout](#)'. This marble head had come from a statue in a cemetery. When the site was bombed, the head was severed from the body of the sculpture. The War Memorial describes it as a 'life size sculpted marble head of a grieving woman with centrally parted hair in a loose chignon'. She 'wears a wreath of pansies, symbolic of loved ones, memories or loving thoughts'. This is emblematic of a major role for women in the Australian War Memorial. When not allegorical figures they are often represented as the mothers, wives and sweethearts who mourn the loss of their sons, husbands and lovers. This reinforces a gendered dichotomy whereby men are the soldiers who protect the home front, while women are the [protected ones](#).



'PATRIOTISM'. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

Another allegorical figure is 'Winged Victory' (or 'Nike'), originally from the [Marrickville War Memorial](#). As explained

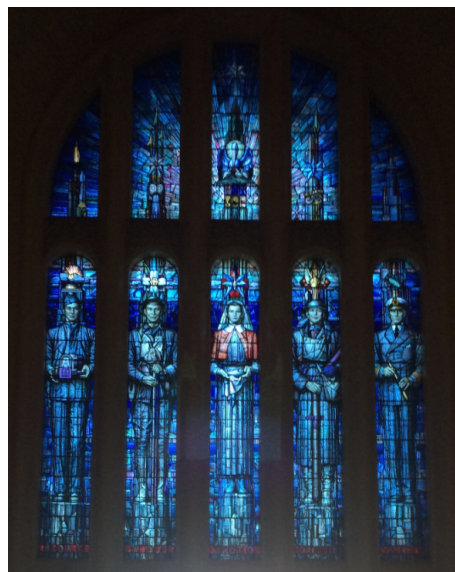
by the Australian War Memorial:

Gilbert Doble's statue of the Greek goddess Nike was one of the first completed monuments to the Great War. Commonly known as Winged Victory, it adorned the Marrickville War Memorial for many years before becoming part of the [Australian War Memorial's collection. [AWM PAIU2014/242.23]

In 2015, a new statue of Victory was installed in Marrickville, subtly different from the original housed in the Australian War Memorial, as explained by the Sydney Morning Herald:

In the original, Nike's sword was raised, though her eyes were cast downward, in a pose intended to evoke a mix of sorrow for the fallen but also proud satisfaction with the war's ultimate result...

In the new interpretation, Nike's sword is at rest.



THE HALL OF MEMORY.
PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

In the Australian War Memorial some representations hover between literal depiction and allegory. Nurses are ubiquitous. There are portraits of actual nurses, often wearing the blood red cape of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Service from the First World War. Nurses' uniforms appear in glass cases alongside soldiers' uniforms. Figures of nurses appear in dioramas alongside soldiers. Nurses also serve as allegorical figures for qualities of patience, devotion and compassion. In the Hall of Memory, there are tall stained glass windows and murals depicting soldiers and sailors. The nurses are the only female figures.

If one walks through the Australian War Memorial looking at the exhibits in roughly chronological order, the Second World War exhibits start to show women in the newly-created Women's Services. Actual women also become more apparent in the more recent exhibits, shown in roles comparable to men, reflecting the recent integration of women into most aspects of military service and combat. Recent military activities are documented in photographic panels.

The passage leading to the Bookshop as one exits the Australian War Memorial houses an almost abstract sculpture 'As of Today...' by Alex Seton. It depicts a series of folded flags hewn of pearl marble. The flags are folded as they would be on the coffin of a lost soldier or sailor. The artist explains that the 'soft pink quality unique to the stone lends itself to the gentle evocation of human flesh and blood'.



ROLL OF HONOUR. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

As this was close to Anzac Day, a poppy had been placed on each blanket. The Roll of Honour, too, was festooned with poppies.

After completing my research, I returned to the sculpture garden, walking past Peter Corlett's statue of Simpson and his Donkey, also decorated with red poppies.

The red of the poppies is a reminder of the blood that is spilt in military conflict, something that is lost sight of in the allegorical figures of 'Patriotism' and 'Victory'. 'Patriotism' represents the emotional attachment to nation which forms the impetus to enlist in military service. 'Victory' represents the feelings of elation after military conflict has successfully been concluded. Neither figure refers to the actual horror of combat, although this is perhaps suggested by the sword wielded by 'Victory'.



The statue of Bellona is tucked away in a quiet part of the garden and could easily be missed. This perhaps reflects the troubled history of the figure, which has been surveyed by Robin Tranter on the occasion of a retrospective of the work of sculptor [Sir Bertram Mackennal](#).

'SIMPSON AND HIS DONKEY'.
PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

Mackennal originally showed 'Bellona' at the Royal Academy in London in 1906, but it did not sell. In 1915 he donated the statue to the Commonwealth of Australia. Its base originally bore the word 'Gallipoli', but this was damaged and a new base was constructed, this time bearing the word 'Victory'. There is a certain instability of meaning here, for Gallipoli was anything but a victory. Bellona was located in several different sites in Canberra, until its current location in the Australian War Memorial Sculpture Garden.

Bellona is a bust, that is, the head and shoulders of a female figure. The bared breasts indicate that she is an allegorical figure rather than a literal depiction of a woman. She has a wrathful countenance, wears a helmet festooned with a skull, and carries a shield.



'REPOSE'. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

Unlike the other allegorical figures surveyed here, she is clearly aligned with death. Perhaps this is the cause of the unease elicited by Bellona. Between the 1920s and the 1990s she was moved several times. Students played pranks like dressing her in underwear or splashing her with red paint. She was unfavourably compared with the unthreatening statue 'Repose' (sometimes also known as 'Relaxation'), which reclines at the entrance to University House in Acton.

Bellona is the Roman Goddess of War. A temple to Bellona was installed in Rome in 296 BCE. When war was declared it was in the area near Bellona's temple. In poetry, Bellona is the personification of war and belligerence. She is associated with the horror of war, as seen in her deathly helmet. In Adam Lindsay Gordon's 1893 poem, '[Bellona](#)', she is like Medusa, with 'locks that are snake-like to

strangle'.



'BELLONA' IN WIDE VIEW. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA MACKIE.

As we mark another Remembrance Day, these allegorical figures suggest different ways of remembering the wars in which Australia has been involved. Should we place red poppies on the heroic figure of the 'Australian Serviceman' or the self-sacrificing 'Simpson and his Donkey'? Should we valorise the literal and allegorical figures of nurses in their blood-red capes? Should we affirm the apparently benign form of 'Patriotism' embodied in Montford's statue or the triumphant figure of Doble's 'Victory'? Should we sympathise with the grief expressed by the 'Woman in the Dugout' with her wreath of pansies?

Or, perhaps we should gaze at the statue of Bellona in a corner of the Sculpture Garden, profiled against the Canberra sky. Her skull helmet and frightening countenance might occasion more sombre reflections on militant nationalism.



Vera Mackie is Director of the Centre for Critical Human Rights Research at the University of Wollongong. Her essay on searching for traces of women in the military archives will appear in Kirsty Reid and Fiona Paisley (eds) Sources and Methods in Histories of Colonialism: Approaching the Imperial Archive (Routledge) in 2017.

Follow Vera on Twitter [@veramackie](https://twitter.com/veramackie).



**'BELLONA', AGAINST THE
CANBERRA SKY.
PHOTOGRAPH BY VERA
MACKIE.**